

Testimony of John Hartwell Regarding Funding of the Citizens Election Program

Tuesday, February 10, 2009

My name is John Hartwell and I live in Westport, CT. Since 2004 I have been active as a member of Democracy for America – Fairfield County, and during 2005 we participated in a state-wide coalition of grass-roots groups to support passage of the Clean Elections legislation that created the Citizens Election Program. In 2008 I was the Democratic candidate for State Senate from the 26th District, encompassing Westport, Wilton, Redding, Ridgefield, as well as parts of Weston, New Canaan, and Bethel. In that campaign I qualified for and used public funds.

I urge the Governor and State Legislature to refrain from further cuts in appropriations to the Citizens Election Fund. I also ask that the State Elections Enforcement Commission continue to be funded separately in recognition of its full range of responsibilities that lie outside the administration of the Program and to minimize the drain on resources directly available to candidates for their campaigns.

It took a great act of political courage on the part of Governor Rell and the General Assembly in 2005 to enact this Program, and I for one was very proud that our state was able to recognize the problems we faced and apply a remedy that was targeted at the root of the problem. It was hailed at the time as a bold stroke, making us the first state in the country to install public funding of elections through the legislative process.

Politics, power, and money have always been deeply entwined, but the leadership of Connecticut greatly reduced the role of fund-raising in campaigns for state offices and raised a barrier between those most likely to demand and receive favors from those seeking office. The solution was not perfect, but it was a great leap forward and any changes to the system should be carefully considered with an eye to strengthening, not reducing, its effectiveness.

The 2010 elections will be the first test of the new system for Constitutional offices. We've always known that this could be expensive, especially if there are multiple candidates competing in party primaries. Even in the best of times, with state coffers overflowing, there would be voices saying that this is an inappropriate use of public funds or that the costs outweighed the benefits. Given the current economic climate we can only expect the pressure to increase, with calls to gut the program or eliminate it entirely. This would be a grave mistake.

As a former candidate, I have first hand knowledge of the beneficial impact of the Citizens Election Fund. The one hundred dollar limitation on individual contributions made sure that no one donor could vastly outweigh the others. The requirement for 300 contributions from my district's towns forced me to reach out and connect with people whom I didn't already know and win their support. Finally, reaching the goal and qualifying for public funding left me free to spend the bulk of my time talking to voters about the issues – not about money.

I would not have been a candidate without the Citizen Elections Fund, and with it I was able to put my case and vigorously compete for public office. The extraordinary first year participation throughout the state by candidates old and new is itself a testimony to the effectiveness of the program, and I urge the Committee, the Legislature, and the Governor to fully fund, strengthen, and protect it.

Thank you.